



## Secretary

Department of Health

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Janet Lee  
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**Via e-mail:** [cpuresponses@coronerscourt.vic.gov.au](mailto:cpuresponses@coronerscourt.vic.gov.au)

Dear Ms Lee

**COR 2020 6727, COR 2021 2415, COR 2021 2457, COR 2021 1636, COR 2020 4857**

**Investigation into the deaths of Bridget Flack, Matt Byrne, Heather Pierard, 'AS' and Natalie Wilson (Trans and Gender Diverse Suicide Cluster) – Department of Health response to coronial recommendations**

Thank you for your letter dated 29 August 2024 attaching Coroner Ingrid Giles' findings in relation to the deaths of Bridget Flack, Matt Byrne, Heather Pierard, 'AS' and Natalie Wilson. My sincere condolences go to the families, chosen families and friends of each of the deceased.

Coroner Giles has made several recommendations in relation to each individual named above, with the same recommendations for the Department of Health (the department) in each finding. Accordingly, my response to the recommendations is consistent for each of the deceased. For ease of reference, I have numbered the recommendations from 1-3 as set out below.

The department has engaged with the Department of Families, Fairness and Housing (DFFH) in preparing this response, which ought to be read in conjunction with the responses prepared by DFFH. The initiatives and programs of both departments are intended to be mutually reinforcing to provide comprehensive support.

*Recommendation 1: That the Victorian Department of Health, as lead, in conjunction with the Department of Families, Fairness and Housing and any other relevant Victorian Government departments, consider urgently increasing resourcing to meet the growing demand for publicly funded health services delivering gender-affirming care to TGD patients, in order to reduce the current waitlists and to support and expand the existing health workforce delivering such care. The department may consider whether this should involve revision of the existing framework for delivery of gender-affirming healthcare and supports to TGD Victorians.*

The department supports this recommendation in principle, and notes that implementation is contingent on future government funding. The department understands that access to timely, multidisciplinary care is crucial to the wellbeing of trans and gender diverse Victorians, and current actions in this respect are set out below.

For children and young people, the 2021-22 State Budget provided \$21.4 million over 4 years for the *Supporting mental health for trans and gender diverse young people* initiative. This initiative boosted specialist gender clinic capacity, mental health and primary care support through Orygen, and peer and family support through Transgender Victoria and Transcend Australia. It also delivered a project that involved co-designing resources with trans and gender diverse community to improve access to and experience of care across primary, community and hospital services. This initiative has reduced wait times for specialist gender clinics and improved pathways between specialist, primary care and mental health services, and peer and family support services. The evaluation of this initiative and the pressing need highlighted by the Coroner will inform further budget considerations.

For trans and gender diverse adults, the 2024-25 State Budget provided \$2.1 million to extend 2 multidisciplinary gender-affirming care clinics in Ballarat and Darebin that provide a trans and gender diverse peer navigation service, integrated endocrinology services, referral to general practitioners (both within and outside the clinics), and allied health and mental health supports. It also includes delivery of trans and gender diverse health training to general practitioners and prescribers, a community of practice, and targeted general practitioner capability building sessions. A community of practice is a space for general practitioners and other relevant health professionals to connect, learn and share experiences. This investment extended the \$1.4 million provided in the 2022-23 State Budget and made the *Trans and Gender Diverse in Community Health* an ongoing commitment.

*Recommendation 2: That the Victorian Department of Health, under the guidance of experts from TGD communities, consider devising and implementing a statewide framework for the provision of culturally appropriate care to TGD people in public hospitals and health services, including in rural and regional Victoria, with additional training to support staff in delivering culturally appropriate care to TGD patients.*

The department supports this recommendation in principle, and notes that implementation is contingent on future government funding. The initiatives that the department is currently taking in this space are set out below.

The department expects all hospitals and health services to provide a safe and inclusive environment for people who are trans and gender diverse. This is outlined in the Policy and Funding Guidelines for Health Services and 'Community health pride – inclusive practice resources', which are both departmental policies. In addition, the Hospital Outreach Post-suicidal Engagement (HOPE) service framework includes a principle that services are to be culturally safe and welcoming for all people in need, including people with diverse sexualities and genders.

Through the 2021-22 State Budget, there was a commitment to deliver statewide services to promote LGBTIQ+ inclusion. From this, Rainbow Health Australia was awarded a grant of \$1.85 million over 2 years to deliver its HOW2 LGBTIQ+ inclusion training across the state, with a focus on community and mental health organisations. This investment links to the 2023-24 State Budget commitment over 4 years to increase by up to 200 the number of community and mental health services with Rainbow Tick accreditation. Rainbow Tick accreditation is an independent framework whereby services meet 6 standards to be considered safe and inclusive for the LGBTIQ+ community. Please see page 6 below for further information about Rainbow Tick accreditation.

From July 2024, Victorian health services have been required to report to the department on population-level patient sex at birth and gender data, so that over time the department has better evidence on any disparities in health service access and outcomes for trans and gender diverse people. To support the implementation of this change, the department developed guidance for health services on how to collect this sensitive information in a safer, inclusive way. The department is also exploring options to partner with trans and gender diverse community organisations to implement this change, including through the provision of secondary consult and other capability building activities.

The department is committed to drawing on the expertise of trans and gender diverse people in continuing to understand issues and progress improvements. In particular, it will engage the LGBTIQ+ Taskforce, which advises on LGBTIQ+ issues to support equality through legislation reform, new policies and programs, as well as the Health and Wellbeing Working Group, which provides advice to the department and Taskforce on health issues. The LGBTIQ+ Taskforce is led by the DFFH, and the Working Group is led by the department. Both the Taskforce and Working Group are made up of community members who are appointed for 2-year terms by the Minister for Equality, to ensure that the Victorian Government's equality initiatives are underpinned by genuine community consultation.

*Recommendation 3: That the Victorian Department of Health, as lead, in conjunction with the Department of Families, Fairness and Housing and any other relevant Victorian Government departments, consider ongoing funding options available to ensure that TGD people and their families have appropriate access to culturally appropriate:*

- i. social and emotional wellbeing supports*
- ii. suicide prevention, postvention and bereavement supports*

*as a means by which to address the high levels of suicidality, social exclusion and mental ill health in the TGD community.*

The department supports this recommendation in principle, and notes that implementation is contingent on future government funding.

The department is presently working with the LGBTIQ+ community and their families, carers, kin and supporters to enhance social and wellbeing supports and suicide prevention and response efforts in Victoria, including through mental health and wellbeing reform in response to the Royal Commission into Victoria's Mental Health System (the Royal Commission). Some recommendations from the Royal Commission specifically address the unique circumstances of people who are trans and gender diverse through reducing social isolation, improving connectedness, and addressing wellbeing in the context of the community's high rates of suicide, distress and mental ill health.

Victorian Government investment in suicide prevention and response initiatives, activities to be delivered under the *Victorian suicide prevention and response strategy 2024-2034* and broader reform are detailed below.

### **Victorian Government investment in suicide prevention and response**

Since the release of the Royal Commission's interim report in November 2019, Victorian Government investment in suicide prevention and response has totaled more than \$215.9 million. The 2024-25 State Budget commits \$3.8 million to support suicide prevention and response efforts. This builds on investment of \$17.7 million in 2023-24, \$21 million in 2022-

23 and \$173.4 million in 2021-22 to implement the suicide prevention and response-related recommendations of the Royal Commission.

### **LGBTIQA+-specific suicide prevention and response initiatives**

Through the 2022-23 and 2023-24 State Budgets and pursuant to Royal Commission recommendation 27.2.a., the Victorian Government has invested in the development of a new aftercare service specifically for LGBTIQA+ communities. This funding has enabled the service model of care to be co-designed in partnership with people with lived experience of suicide, members of the LGBTIQA+ community and their loved ones. Commissioning and establishment of the aftercare service will be informed by this model of care. To ensure that LGBTIQA+ people receive tailored aftercare support while the design and implementation of the new service occurs, the 2024-25 State Budget provides funding to continue delivery of Mind Australia's LGBTIQA+ aftercare program.

The 2024-25 State Budget also continues delivery of Switchboard Victoria's LGBTIQA+ suicide prevention program, which includes dedicated LGBTIQA+ postvention and bereavement supports, the LGBTIQA+ Lived Experience Network and capability building activities. Postvention includes a range of activities following a death by suicide to support those bereaved or affected (family, friends, professionals, peers, responders and community), including psychosocial support, practical support, counselling and bereavement services. The department's Suicide Prevention and Response Office works closely with Switchboard Victoria, the Coroners Court of Victoria, and Wellways Australia and Jesuit Social Services (the providers of the StandBy Support After Suicide program in Victoria) to monitor suspected suicides of trans and gender diverse Victorians and ensure that culturally appropriate postvention responses occur.

The Balit Durn Durn Centre (established by the Victorian Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation) is leading the co-design of an Aboriginal community-led approach to prevent and respond to Aboriginal suicide in Victoria. They have also established an Advisory Group (the Knowledge Holders) to advise on self-harm and suicide in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. This work will consider culturally appropriate approaches to preventing and responding to suicides for LGBTIQA+ Aboriginal people, including sistergirls and brotherboys.

### **LGBTIQA+-specific social and emotional wellbeing supports**

Since 2010, the Victorian Government has allocated approximately \$1.9 million per annum towards the Healthy Equal Youth (HEY) project to deliver LGBTIQA+ projects and initiatives through their annual grants round, and funding partner organisations that support trans and gender diverse communities, such as Parents of Gender Diverse Children, the Zoe Belle Gender Collective and Thorne Harbour Health.

The 2021-22 State Budget invested an additional \$2.4 million over 4 years to continue the HEY, which supports the health and wellbeing of young LGBTIQA+ Victorians through peer support, referrals, community visibility, celebration and education.

Across 2023-25, the Diverse Communities' Mental Health and Wellbeing Grants Program will fund 4 LGBTIQA+ organisations, including those working with trans and gender diverse people, refugees, and in regional settings. The Grants Program delivers programs, direct

services, research, workforce development and supports advocacy to help create a more diverse and inclusive mental health and wellbeing system. Recipients include Switchboard Victoria, Thorne Harbour Health, Minus18 Foundation and queerspace (Drummond Street Services).

### **Broader social and emotional wellbeing and suicide prevention and response efforts**

In response to recommendation 3 in the Royal Commission's Interim Report, the Hospital Outreach Post-suicidal Engagement (HOPE) program has been expanded and a new child and youth-specific program established. The department funded Switchboard Victoria to deliver a LGBTIQ+ affirmative practice and suicide prevention training package to HOPE services in 2023-24. This training was carried out in partnership with Thorne Harbour Health.

There are also broader Victorian Government reforms in progress to create a future mental health and wellbeing system that will provide support to all Victorians, as well as contribute to suicide prevention efforts, these include:

- Mental Health and Wellbeing Locals, in response to recommendation 3.2.a of the Royal Commission: offer treatment, care and support for people aged 26 years and over who are experiencing mental health and wellbeing concerns. Providers are expected to meet the needs of diverse consumers, including people who are trans and gender diverse and their loved ones. Thorne Harbour Health is a consortium partner for Mental Health and Wellbeing Locals in Dandenong, Melton, Bendigo and Echuca. There are currently 17 dedicated LGBTIQ+ positions within the Mental Health and Wellbeing Locals, which include both LGBTIQ+ peer and clinician roles. Services provide localised supports such as the 'Queer Peers' group and LGBTIQ+ art group.
- Transforming Trauma Victoria (TTV) (formerly the Mental Health Statewide Trauma Service): worked in partnership with a range of people with lived experience of trauma (including those who are trans and gender diverse) to co-design its key functions of research, workforce capability and service delivery. TTV's executive committee includes a board member of Switchboard Victoria, and the service's design has been informed by a consortium of 13 organisations across a range of communities. Thorne Harbour Health is a member of this consortium. Once TTV is operational (timeframes are subject to budget processes), it will deliver specialist trauma support and workforce training, including for people in the LGBTIQ+ community.
- Commencement of the *Mental Health and Wellbeing Act 2022* (pursuant to Royal Commission recommendation 42): includes principles with which all mental health and wellbeing services must take reasonable steps to comply and give proper consideration when making decisions under this Act. Within the department, the Office of the Chief Psychiatrist has updated its 'Improving sexual safety in mental health and wellbeing services' guideline to align with the Act. The Chief Psychiatrist's guidelines contain specialist information and advice on clinical practice in mental health and wellbeing services.
- Pursuant to recommendation 57, the Royal Commission also recommended a range of structural workforce reforms to attract, train and transition the staff needed for Victoria's mental health services, including non-government organisations,

community services, and Local, Area and Statewide Mental Health and Wellbeing Services. The Workforce Capability uplift project for LGBTIQ+ Communities aims to support mental health practitioners and services to provide inclusive and responsive care, preparing organisations for Rainbow Tick accreditation. Rainbow Health, in conjunction with 4 other organisations, have tailored their existing HOW2 program to be tailored for the mental health sector. The HOW2 program supports organisations to make sustainable changes and promotes continuous collaboration to improve inclusion of the LGBTIQ+ community. Additionally, they will develop a community of practice, using the ECHO model, to aid professional development and collaboration. Both parts of the project aim to launch in January 2025.

### **Victorian suicide prevention and response strategy 2024-2034 (the strategy)**

On 10 September 2024, the Victorian Government launched the *Victorian suicide prevention and response strategy 2024-2034*, which is a call-to-action to the entire Victorian community to unite to reduce the incidence and impact of suicide and suicide-related stigma over the next decade. The strategy is accompanied by an accountability framework and rolling implementations plans (the first of which covers a two-year period from 2024-26). It emphasises the need for compassionate and responsive systems that actively prevent suicidal distress, particularly for groups disproportionately affected by suicide, such as LGBTIQ+ communities. The strategy adopts an intersectional approach, recognising that systems and structures interact to oppress and create barriers and overlapping forms of discrimination, stigma and power imbalances based on characteristics such as gender, sexual orientation and identity.

The strategy does not operate in isolation, and there are policies and frameworks (both existing and in development) at state and national levels that will contribute to its success. These frameworks include *Pride in our future: Victoria's LGBTIQ+ strategy 2022-2032*, which is administered by DFFH. The strategy also aligns with forthcoming frameworks that were established pursuant to recommendations of the Royal Commission into Victoria's Mental Health System:

- Wellbeing in Victoria: a strategy to promote good mental health
- Diverse communities mental health and wellbeing framework
- Mental health and wellbeing outcomes and performance framework

The strategy was co-designed with and draws on the knowledge of people with lived and living experience of suicide and will continue to place this expertise at the centre of implementation, monitoring and evaluation activities. The rolling implementation plans will ensure that action taken responds to new and emerging priorities and evidence.

### **Suicide prevention and response strategy 2024-2034: first implementation plan 2024-2026**

The strategy's first implementation plan, designates the lead government department, agency or community partner responsible for delivering initiatives from 2024 to 2026 across the following priority areas:

- building and supporting connected systems
- strengthening existing supports across the suicide prevention and response
- building and supporting a compassionate, trauma-informed workforce

- reducing suicide-related stigma and enabling community-wide action
- driving whole-of-Victorian-government collaboration and innovation
- building on and using data and our evidence base in delivery and evaluation

The priority areas will benefit trans and gender diverse people, along with their families, carers, kin and supporters, by ensuring access to integrated, culturally safe and empathetic supports. This approach fosters inclusive communities, enhances understanding, reduces stigma and supports coordinated, data-informed responses across systems and services.

There are also specific initiatives to address the high levels of suicidality, social exclusion and mental ill health impacting LGBTIQ+ communities.

### **Department of Health-led LGBTIQ+ initiatives**

The first implementation plan includes priority initiatives recommended by the Royal Commission. These include:

- Co-design, implementation and evaluation of a new aftercare service for the LGBTIQ+ community (initiative 2.12).
- Support LGBTIQ+ communities to access tailored prevention and postvention programs, including through Switchboard Victoria's suicide prevention program (initiative 2.14).
- Co-lead with DFFH in continuing to work with the Coroners Court of Victoria, Switchboard Victoria and the Commissioner for LGBTIQ+ Communities to improve data collection on LGBTIQ+ suicides (initiative 6.3).

I trust that this information is of assistance to the Court. The department remains deeply committed to continuing its work to improve all aspects of the health, safety and wellbeing of Victoria's trans and gender diverse community.

Yours sincerely



**Professor Euan M Wallace AM**

Secretary

25/11/2024